

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
OCTOBER 25, 2004

FOR INFORMATION CONTACT  
COLLEEN MILLER 804-225-2042

## VOTING RIGHTS TO BE PROTECTED

Hoping to end discrimination against voters who have disabilities, the Virginia Office for Protection and Advocacy (VOPA) announced today the specific locations that it will monitor on Election Day, as part of its 2004 Voting Accessibility Campaign. On November 2, 2004, VOPA will monitor these voting sites to ensure that voters with disabilities have an equal opportunity to vote and have assurances that they can cast a private ballot.

The Virginia Constitution guarantees the right to vote to every citizen of the Commonwealth, unless the person is a convicted felon or unless a court has determined that the person lacks capacity. This means that all Virginians, even those with physical or cognitive disabilities should be able to vote if they wish, unless a court has said otherwise.

In Virginia, voters with disabilities have encountered inaccessible voting locations as well as practices and attitudes from election officials that act as a barrier to voting. Nationwide, voters with disabilities also face physical barriers, such as inaccessible polling places and voting equipment, as well as attitudinal barriers. According to a recent national survey, people with disabilities were, on average, about 12 percentage points less likely than those without disabilities to vote in the 2000 presidential election. This lower turnout rate had a substantial impact on the overall national voter turnout. If persons with disabilities had voted at the same rate as persons without disabilities, there would have been 3.2 million additional voters in the 2000 election.

“In recent history, people with disabilities have been barred from participating in elections all over this country,” said Colleen Miller, VOPA’s director. “It is well past time for this practice to end. We are committed to supporting people with disabilities as they exercise their fundamental right to vote.”

VOPA has provided technical assistance and information to many voting locations. On election day, VOPA will monitor various polling places within the Richmond, Tidewater, Roanoke, Wise, Charlottesville, and Lynchburg areas. VOPA will be inspecting voting sites to make sure they are accessible to voters with disabilities, identifying any violations of federal law by the Commonwealth and localities, and taking such steps as are necessary to protect the right of all Virginians to take part in the democratic process. Monitors will be on site to answer questions that people with disabilities may have about their voting rights. Monitors will also observe how people are treated at polling places.

VOPA has a unique role in ensuring voting rights for voters with disabilities. The Help America Vote Act of 2002 authorized funding for VOPA and other protection and advocacy systems across the country to “ensure the full participation in the electoral process for individuals with disabilities, including registering to vote, casting a vote and access to polling sites.” Pursuant to this broad mandate, VOPA seeks to ensure election access to a wide range of persons with disabilities, including, but not limited to, persons with cognitive, sensory and physical disabilities.